

Winds of change

by SAM ODROWSKI

In life, the only constant is change, and my life has been changing constantly since graduating from the journalism program at Durham College in the spring of 2017.

It was at that time I started my first journalism job, as a freelance reporter at the Standard Newspaper in my hometown of Port Perry, Ontario, situated on Lake Scugog, with a population of 9,000.

I worked there for just under a year and during that time I learned about the inner workings and nuances of local news in a small community. After a short 11 months of covering Council meetings, funding announcements, fun events and people of interest, I began searching for more of a full-time position and with no luck locally ? I found it in northwestern Ontario.

There was a job opening in a distant land, called Fort Frances, nearly 1,700 kilometers away from my family and friends in Port Perry.

While it seemed daunting to leave the only life I've ever known for a new one so far away, I was eager to build upon my experience as a journalist and experience the northwestern edge of Ontario.

I quickly found a place to live and began my adventure at the Fort Frances Times in late February of 2018, packing my bags and driving 19 hours to my new home.

I was welcomed into the community with open arms and quickly became established as a reporter there, covering everything local, from education and municipal politics to agriculture and indigenous issues.

Fort Frances is small in size, home to a little over 5,000 people, located in the Rainy River District, which has a population of 20,000.

While the community was small, there was no shortage of exciting news to cover, such as the Town's battle with a multi-national corporation to reopen its mill, litigation over land claims with area reserves or sharing the personal stories of Sixties Scoop survivors from Rainy River First Nations.

The only downside of living in Fort Frances was its remoteness, with the closest city being a four hour drive to the east in Thunder Bay or a five hour drive to the west in Winnipeg.

Fort Frances is a border town, across the river from International Falls, Minnesota, so it did provide a cross-border shopping experience, even if it was about the same size as Fort Frances.

My job at the Fort Frances Times was fast paced, considering it printed four newspapers a week, Monday-Thursday, with the Wednesday newspaper circulating throughout the Rainy River District, while the other three were circulated within the town.

The Times is the only newspaper I know of where all the printing is done in-house, which provided great opportunities for covering breaking news the day that it happened.

Newspaper layout and design was an important part of my role at the Fort Frances Times, since it had four newspapers to assemble each week. The editor at the time, Mike Behan, would break up the work among the reporting staff.

At the time it seemed like a chore, but provided great experience for me as I now take on the editor role at the Orangeville Citizen.

Of course, the best part of any job is the people, and there was no shortage of awesome people working at the Fort Frances Times.

The office was quite large with 30 staff, since all of the newspaper production was done in-house and it helped to create a wonderful community within its walls.

While I was working at the Fort Frances Times, my plan all along was to gather a year or two of experience to find a decent reporter job back in southern Ontario, closer to my family and hometown friends.

Lucky for me, the opportunity fell right into my lap when the owner of London Publishing Company, Ray Stanton, purchased the Fort Frances Times in October of 2019.

London Publishing Company owns over 20 newspapers that run independently in Ontario, including the Orangeville Citizen and Shelburne Free Press, so there was an opportunity for me to transfer somewhere a little closer to home.

I accepted a reporting job at the New Tecumseth Times in March and while it was sad to leave the life I created in Fort Frances, I knew it would be nice to live a little closer to where my roots are, a short one hour drive from Port Perry, instead of 19.

Of course, as we all know, the pandemic struck halfway into March, creating a whole new category of news for me to cover as I settled into New Tecumseth.

Over the last nine months, I've enjoyed reporting on New Tecumseth's Town Council, arts community, school boards, not-for-profit charities and outstanding residents who work to uplift their community.

I was anticipating my role at the New Tecumseth Times to at least take me into the New Year, when my contract was set to expire, but life had different plans.

Earlier this month the editor position at the Haliburton Echo became available and the Citizen's former editor, Mike Baker happily hopped on it to be closer to his family, who live in Lindsay, Ontario.

With Mike leaving the Orangeville and Shelburne newspapers, the position that I'm currently working became available and I gladly accepted.

My days look quite different now, going from reporter to editor, but I'm grateful for all the new challenges that come my way.